

**A
Brief History
of
The Utah State
Martin Luther King Jr.
Human Rights Commission
1986-1993**

**By
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(State Chair)
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Prepared for Utah Activities
Commemorating the Nation's
30th Anniversary Observance
of the March on Washington
of 1963.

Introduction

During a White House ceremony on November 2, 1983, legislation was signed establishing our newest federal holiday honoring Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Though it called for the first holiday to be officially observed on Monday, January 20, 1986, a group of national leaders representing diverse backgrounds was called to serve as part of what was known as the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. Upon its development, under the visionary guidance of Coretta Scott King (chair), the legislative mandate stated that the King Holiday "...shall serve as a time for Americans to reflect on the principles of racial equality and nonviolent social change espoused by Martin Luther King Jr." (Appendix A).

Early deliberations among the federal commissioners expressed a need to expand the current organizational model to the nation's states and localities with emphasis on coordination and accountability relative to the activities, special projects and programs evolving in each state as a result of the established holiday. In fact, at that time (1983-1986) fewer than 17 states officially recognized the King Federal Holiday (Annual Report 1991).

In 1986, when the official national holiday began, other states were called on to "coordinate, encourage and provide" as this holiday quickly gained momentum. Like many states during that time, Utah joined in to legally establish its state holiday during the 1986 General Session when both the House and Senate passed Senate Bill No. 17 (Appendix B).

State Response

Responding to a need to provide more uniformity to state (Utah) activities, a group of eight people, which from 1986-1988 formed an "Unincorporated State Holiday Planning Commission," met during June of 1988 to outline a more definitive charge. At the request of Betty O. Sawyer (Director of Black Affairs - UT), the group established three broad goals:

- o To ensure public education and awareness of Dr. King's philosophy and principles of non-violence and dream of rights for all people.

- To act as a central "clearing house" for information or events and activities being held within Utah.
- To sponsor state-level activities, as determined feasible and appropriate (Appendix C).

During July of that same year, Dr. Forrest C. Crawford (Weber State University) and Dr. Afesa Adams (University of Utah) were invited to speak at the Annual National Planning Commission meeting sponsored by the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-violent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia (Appendix D). Upon their return, another series of meetings took place toward further establishment of the State King Commission.

State Government Charge

It was not until August of 1989 (Appendix E) that a formal meeting had taken place between former Governor Norman Bangerter, Dr. Forrest Crawford and Ms. Betty Sawyer that the request to establish a state government level Martin Luther King Jr./Human Rights Commission by executive order was made. On July 30, 1991, Governor Norman Bangerter signed an executive order establishing the Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights Commission for the State of Utah (Appendix F). With this gesture, Utah joined over 40 other states that have commissions established either by (a) Legislative mandate, (b) executive order or (c) state proclamation. In general, the Governor set as its purpose ... to encourage appropriate ceremonies and activities honoring the King/Human Rights Day on the third Monday of each January. Since that date, the Commission has been actively involved in an array of sponsored projects, training/education programs and holiday activities (Appendix G).

Closing Thought

The expectation is for this Commission to continue leading, serving, supporting and promoting the importance of education and awareness using the Kingian six (6) principles of non-violence as a compelling guide (Appendix H). Furthermore, it is the ultimate aim of this board to actively explore ways in which to institutionalize the relevance and dignity of this great holiday as a symbolic reminder of all the hopes, dreams and aspirations of a continually evolving pluralistic society.